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**Editorial: Critical diversity, philosophy and praxis**  
**Gender, Work and Organization, 24(5)**

**Alison Pullen, Sheena Vachhani, Suzanne Gagnon and Nelarine Cornelius**

There have been major collections published on diversity in work and organization studies in recent years (see for example Bleijenbergh et al., 2016; Bendl et al., 2015), and which have discussed the complex relationships between the processes of inclusion and exclusion (see also Ashcraft et al. (2012), the meaning and practice of local diversity practices versus global debates, and the ways in which diversity, and its management, is addressed in organizations. These contributions recognise the importance of history and context (Knights and Omanović, 2016), as well as the epistemological and methodological diversity entailed in diversity research in organizations (Bendl et al., 2015). Furthermore, handbooks on gender and organizations (Kumra et al., 2014; Jeanes et al., 2012) have demonstrated how dominant institutional practices and ideologies effect minority identities (see also Zanoni and Janssens, 2007) for a notable example, and the ways intersectional differences determine experiences at work (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Diversity has become a much attended to subject in corporate discourse, as organizations seek competitive advantage by incorporating diversity into their business case mainly through their corporate social responsibility and equality and inclusion programmes. The political, economic and social contexts in which organizations function influences the latest trends surrounding diversity in organizations (Holvino and Kamp, 2009), and some research has addressed how this leads to individualism and voluntarism (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011).

Importantly, for this Special Issue of *Gender, Work and Organization*, we are mindful of the developments within critical diversity studies which have emerged to openly acknowledge the relations of power that determine which ‘diversity issues’ or ‘minority subjects’ are examined in the first place (Ahonen, et al. 2014, Zanoni, et al., 2010) and to appreciate the ‘‘fractured future’ of diverse diversities’ (Pringle and Strachan, 2015: 4). Many of these critical diversity studies problematize the binary relationships that produce marginality which as Pullen and Knights (2007) state emerge as a consequence of the authority invested in the centre. In this issue, we suggest that the historical separation of theory and practice in diversity studies in work and organization studies has contributed to such problems associated with studies of ‘diversity’. As Ahmed and Swan (2006: 96) write, ‘diversity has been viewed as problematic because it individuates difference, conceals inequalities and neutralises histories of antagonism and

struggle’. While decades of research have advanced our understanding of the inter-relationships between gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and disability in organizations, to name but a few, there remain important disjunctures in how diversity and philosophy come together to affect practice in thinking and doing diversity differently.

Critical research in diversity takes multi-demographic and context-specific approaches to unearthing existing unequal power relations in organizations and show how they are maintained, resisted or transformed (Ahonen, et al, 2014; Zanoni et al, 2010; Swan and Fox, 2010). The special issue advances this agenda by calling for work centred on praxis – the practice and application of knowledge and that which is distinguished from theory. Hannah Arendt called praxis the highest and most important level of the ‘active life’, often neglected in western philosophy’s focus on the contemplative life. To engage in social change towards justice and equality, we stress, following Arendt (1958/2013), the relevance of philosophical ideas to real life. This praxis forms the basis of solidarity and action, a participatory democracy vital for political change, and as Arendt reminds us, an alternative form of organising that stands in contrast to bureaucratized and elitist forms of politics. Others have argued that a weak conception of praxis has limited the ethical potential of critical management in general (Foster and Wiebe, 2010), yet within critical theory, praxis - the elimination of oppression through new systems that liberate the individual - has equal importance to critique.

This special issue focuses attention on advancing theoretical discussions of diversity and inequality that bridge philosophy and praxis, and suggest that furthering philosophical contributions enhances praxis, emancipation and change. This issue emerges as a result of David Knights’ insightful suggestion that two separate streams on praxis (Suzanne Gagnon, Nelarine Cornelius and Zanele Ndaba) and philosophy (Sheena Vachhani, Carl Rhodes, Torkild Thanem and Alison Pullen) from the 2014 *Gender, Work and Organization* conference be merged. In doing this, this special issue creates a space for politically driven, philosophical and practice-based papers to address some of the tensions and difficulties in diversity/difference research. These contributions raise questions for the ways in which researchers can interrogate prevailing methodologies for their potential to aid agency and community action (Gagnon and Cukier, 2012), or in advocating for ‘radical, alternative diversity projects’ that advance new forms of organizing to help effect change (Zanoni et al., 2010). There was a time when debates concerning *philosophy and organization* were almost exclusively about white male middle-class organizational theorists discussing white male middle-class philosophers. This is no longer exclusively the case, with some of the most recent significant advances in work and organization studies being developed through the philosophical problematization of gender, class, ethnicity

(Calás et al, 2010), and other forms of diversity, especially as it builds on the contemporary continental philosophical tradition (Phillips, et al, 2015; Harding et al, 2013; Höpfl, 2000; Vachhani, 2012). Pullen and Rhodes (2014) explore a corporeal ethics as practical and political acts that seek to defy the negation of difference in organizations. Cultural and women's studies have given us a means to engage from theory in the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981), where 'embodied theory emerges from the material reality of multiple oppression and in turn conceptualizes that materiality' (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1994: 6; see also Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Recognizing and enacting this (un)doing may make possible a political commitment to praxis: that is, living difference and activating social change. By expanding the ways in which feminist philosophies, amongst others, can productively inform how we understand and practice diversity politics in organizations, we asked the question: What ethical responsibility do we have as researchers and writers to challenge the taken for granted norms of the field of work and organization to effect social change?

Despite on-going advances in research, theory and some strategies for change, evidence of emancipation and equity in organisations and society remains disappointing as Benschop et al. (2012) testify. In diversity research in work and organisation studies, methodologies that reflect experiences of minority groups have been largely absent (Prasad and Qureshi 2016). The bulk of extant studies continue to be embedded in Anglo-American cultural contexts, engaging western narratives of knowledge that ignore practices of indigenous communities (Jack & Westwood, 2009). We welcomed papers that articulated experiences of subjects through their own discourses in a manner that reflects truths and experiences found outside frameworks of the global north. These included post-colonial contexts where the 'inequality space' emerges from a melding of historical and contemporary elements and may involve the promise of developing alternative knowledge(s) that ultimately disrupt inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Equally, we sought engagement with feminist epistemologies of knowledge adopted in philosophy (Lennon and Whitford, 1994) that reinvigorate feminist debates to explore the doing and undoing of organisational diversity. Yet these feminist debates have often been rooted in privileged perspectives, including white privilege as Swan and Liu (both this volume) discuss directly and we strongly recognise the need for more voices that *decolonise theory* (Faria, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty et al, 1991), provide perspectives from varying social contexts (Harding, 2004; hooks, 2004) and involve negotiating different identities and cultural spaces (Tatli, 2011; Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006).

The papers in this special issue encompass a wide range of contexts that seek to shape new forms of engagement with the philosophical antecedents of praxis, and include empirical

and conceptual papers suggesting how critical diversity scholarship can itself be a form of praxis and social change. The papers advance an interrogation of how praxis can be supported by philosophical debates for furthering our understanding of diversity and inequality.

The special issue opens with Helena Liu's study of Chinese Australian managers and city councillors working in diversity advocacy and practice, discussing how these diversity professionals are engaged in critical diversity praxis. This paper shows the importance of postcolonial and international settings for expanding critical approaches to diversity scholarship. Liu examines Chinese Australian managers and city councillor's discourses through Daoism, offering a non-'White' lens that embodies a philosophy of anti-racism organizational change and advocacy rarely seen to date in the literature. As Liu argues, managers use the "strength of softness and the power of non-action" in ways that have the potential to disrupt white dominance in the so-called 'Asian Century'.

In the second paper Faiza Ali and Jawad Syed provide a timely empirical analysis of diversity policies in Pakistan. They shed much needed light on how, despite governmental efforts to improve women's employment and equality, statistics suggest that these efforts are not completely fruitful. The various challenges faced by women in Pakistan's formal employment sector are analysed at the macro-national, meso-organisational and micro-individual level. Ali and Syed explore structural and relational perspectives on gender and apply these to empirical insights in Pakistan to assert that holding organisations solely responsible for diversity policies may be deeply insufficient as the practices of diversity management and gender equality are interrelated with both macro-societal and micro-individual issues. The paper suggests that policy makers need to focus on multi-level challenges facing women in order to understand and improve female economic activity and employment, and furthermore that other stakeholders, such as academics and human resource practitioners, need to develop realistic understandings of gender equality policies in diverse societies and organisations.

Following on, Laura Dobusch presents a highly original examination of how gender and dis-/ability are co-constituted and addressed by 'diversity management' practices, bringing this analysis squarely into the domain of diversity praxis and its contested meanings and shape. Dobusch's study analyses gender and dis/ability, providing insight into what she labels the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics of diversity management, in terms of social desirability or economic exploitability. The paper draws on interviews across for- and non-profit organizations and reveals "persistent, unequal dynamics of inclusion and exclusion" across gender and dis/ability. This paves a way for further research on dis-/ability and how a "mostly undisputed" gender equality norm interrelates with inclusion for people with disabilities, in situ.

Dobusch further contributes to our own self-reflexive practice/praxis as researchers, making explicit the inherent dynamics of placing ‘diversity dimensions’ at the core (e.g. gender) and the periphery (e.g. dis-/ability) within scholarship’s own research landscape.

In the next paper, Katy Fuller and Rita Gardner’s feminist scholarship contributes to existing research on diversity and organizational inequities. The paper takes Hannah Arendt’s conception of praxis and her critique of family to ‘diagnose how praxis and diversity initiatives may suffer when family is used as an organizing principle’. In a close reading of Arendt, Fuller and Gardner argue that family as an organising principle serves to reinforce hierarchical sameness within organizations, and as such works against diversity. To critique this hierarchical sameness, the authors suggest that Arendtian praxis offers the potential to ‘destabilize homogenizing tendencies, and effect social change by challenging “business as usual”’. The paper goes on to interrogate praxis within the context of ‘a diverse, plural community of actors’ and therefore suggests that praxis can therefore support diversity within organizations. In other words, organizations with appropriate structures that enable praxis to emerge are those that ‘do’ diversity better’. In conclusion, Fuller and Gardiner shows how a narrow conception of family that obscures the marked realities of gender, racial, sexual, and class-based inequities is privileged.

Deborah Brewis’ study of diversity practitioners is presented in the next paper. Brewis contends that although positive and negative responses to addressing diversity action in organisations are often reported, our understanding of the role of emotion in diversity practice is limited. The paper explores how diversity practitioners use compassion in their moral reasoning when addressing diversity issues and challenges. Her findings suggest that compassion can play an important role in the pursuit of social justice but that it can also be marshalled more instrumentally: less concerned with *eudaemonia*, the pursuit of a life well lived, than a reduction of what organisations may regard as the ‘undesirable’ emotions associated with complaints and grievance that may potentially ‘harm’ organisational reputation and identity. Nonetheless, compassion, Brewis argues through the feminist philosophy of Martha Nussbaum, may aid diversity practice as it may mitigate some of the shortcomings of utilitarian and deontological approaches to addressing inequality and difference.

Carl Rhodes’ article critically reconsiders debates about the business case for workplace diversity, focusing on LGBT activism. Rhodes suggests these debates have rested on an oppositional distinction between justifying diversity on the grounds of self-interested business and on the grounds of ethics, equality and social justice which has led to an impasse. Ethical praxis is developed as a way of mediating this impasse. Drawing on Judith Butler and

Emmanuel Levinas' considerations of the relationship between ethics and the practice of justice, Rhodes argues that critiques of the business case for diversity rely on a pure ethics that does not adequately recognise its connection to politics. Conversely, support for the business case evinces a politics that has failed to remember its origin in ethics. Rhodes draws on the practice of justice where justice is about how ethics manifests in the social and institutionalized world of interpersonal relations. For Levinas and for Butler, the political pursuit of justice is necessitated by ethics, but is always ethically compromised. Thus, justice is the imperfect social implication of ethics. Ethical praxis can be considered a political intervention undertaken in the name of ethics, and the business case, despite its ethical poverty, holds potential to create real opportunities for justice in organizations.

In our final paper, Elaine Swan's paper asks a simple, yet challenging question, 'what can white people do?' In an acute critique of advantage as power and culture, white privilege is problematized in relation to the tensions between philosophy and praxis. Drawing on philosophers of race, Swan analyses collective white ignorance in relation to existing critical diversity research. In particular Swan proposes 'listening as a form of progressive white praxis' after Black activists and academics who teach how to listen and learn. Swan's contribution shows how 'whiteness structures the production of knowledge and praxis', and moves through three core issues of white epistemology, white ignorance and encounters with the stranger to propose listening as a form of white praxis to acknowledge racism in its complexity and propose future anti-racist research on diversity and organisations including the ethical responsibility and political vision for its accomplishment.

The papers in this special issue advance a theoretical and empirical agenda crucial for further understanding critical diversity and its intersections with philosophy and praxis. It seems that as researchers we need to place more emphasis on bridging the gap between research and theory and their translation into strategies for change, emancipation and equity (Benschop et al., 2012). As Benschop writes, 'The challenge of diversity is much more than a change in terminology from categories like gender, ethnicity, age and class to the more encompassing and concealing term 'diversity'. In contrast to gender and other categories of identity, which are often represented as sources of social inequality in organisations, 'diversity' does not so powerfully appeal to our sense of social justice' (Benschop, 2001:1166, cited in Ahmed and Swan, 2006:96). Additionally, this special issue attests to the importance of philosophical insights for furthering our understanding of diversity and diversity praxis and suggests a number of future directions for research in the field.

Firstly, there is a need to move beyond what are often implicit oppositional approaches to diversity, and that over-emphasise or are reduced to business case friendly scenarios, or suggest a pristine ethical space from which diversity may be practiced. A future direction for critical diversity research rests on acknowledging political praxis, which is at play in attempts to manage diversity. Secondly, further focus on philosophical insights from feminist epistemologies of knowledge (Lennon and Whitford, 1994), for example, may help us to move beyond the problematic of diversity research in work and organisation as individuating difference and neutralising histories of antagonism and struggle (Ahmed and Swan, 2006). Thirdly, a turn towards indigenous methodologies for critical diversity and empirical insights beyond the global north, as we have suggested, form crucial insights into post/anti-colonial praxis-orientated studies. Decolonising theory (Mohanty, 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan and Calás, 2015) is crucial for the achieving these aims. In addition, critiques of ‘whiteness’ and privilege, which are largely absent from work and organisation studies, require far greater attention. Finally, alternative forms of organisation and social justice movements that fight against inequality, oppression and violence have much to teach us about critical diversity praxis. Whilst alternative organisation has received attention in wider work and organisation studies, there is a relative paucity of research that investigates how alternative organisational forms and new working arrangements may effect change and enable diversity to be practiced differently, for example through collaborative community projects.



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